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ON PAGE A1

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Weinberger Says He'll Cut Back On People With Security Access

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 6 — Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger said today that the Pentagon would reduce the number of people who had access to secret information so as to foil spy rings like the one John A. Walker, a retired Navy warrant officer, is accused of running for 18 years.

Mr. Weinberger said in an interview that he had ordered a thorough review of security procedures in the Defense Department. "The numbers of people who have clearances is too large and we are going to cut that down," he said.

Meanwhile, a high-ranking official said that "at least another four or five arrests" were expected in the Walker case, in which four people are already being held. [Page D18.]

Sees 'Very Serious Losses'

On the potential damage from the spying, Mr. Weinberger asserted, "I think there are very serious losses that went on over a long period of time."

Mr. Weinberger's spokesman, Michael I. Burch, said in a news briefing that the assessment of damage "has gone up." He said that "if you want to say even more serious, that's fair enough."

The Navy's chief submarine officer, Vice Adm. Nils R. Thunman, suggested that whatever information might have been passed to the Soviet Union by the suspects had not threatened the American fleet of missile submarines.

Admiral Thunman said in a separate interview, "We see no threat to the fleet ballistic missile force today or in the foreseeable future." The admiral declined to discuss the Walker case but said he stood by that statement under any circumstances.

Other naval officers said they had seen no intelligence reports on Soviet antisubmarine warfare indicating that a spy ring had given the Soviet Union damaging information. They said Soviet antisubmarine operations had

not been effective against American submarines.

Responding to questions, Mr. Burch said the Navy had no plan to change its undersea network of devices for detecting Soviet submarines.

Some submarine experts interviewed for an article that appeared in The New York Times today suggested that the Sound Surveillance System might have to be replaced or rebuilt. "There is no consideration being given to that," Mr. Burch said.

Mr. Weinberger said Mr. Walker was not cooperating with investigators from the Justice Department but declined to say in what way. "We have to find out precisely how he operated and what he did, if we can," Mr. Weinberger said. "He's not cooperating."

The Defense Secretary said: "We're certainly going to review the whole thing, all of those procedures and operations, and see if there's any way we could have gotten onto it any sooner. At this point, nobody seems to think so. And we only did in this case only because the former wife got angry."

'Always Some Few Willing'

Mr. Weinberger, drawing a parallel with Benedict Arnold, the Army hero who sold out to the British in the American Revolution, said, "I don't know that anybody has ever been able to guarantee there will be no future espionage; there will always be some few people who are willing to be traitors."

Officials have reported that more than 2.5 million of the 3.1 million members of the armed forces and civilian employees of the Defense Department have security clearances. They have also reported that procedures for checking on applicants for clearance were haphazard and inconsistent.

In recent congressional testimony, Eli S. Flyer, a specialist on personnel security and consultant to the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., said, "All too frequently, recruits with a history of pre-service adjustment problems receive clearances indistinguishable from those of fellow recruits with exemplary pre-service records."

He said that from 1960 through 1984, more than 27,300 enlisted personnel had been discharged from the service for drug addiction, behavioral disorders, alcoholism, homosexuality, sexual perversion and misconduct, after they had been given security clearances.

He said that many of those had received clearances that would give them access to "top secret" and "sensitive compartmented information," the last including the nation's most important secrets.

Thomas J. O'Brien, director of the Defense Investigative Service, which handles security clearances, testified at the same time that his agency was unable to complete periodic reinvestigations of people with security clearances for lack of personnel and money.

Timing Not Connected, He Says

He said the program was intended to find people "who may no longer be reliable or trustworthy." Yet, he added, "in almost all instances in which cleared people have been found guilty of espionage, it is subsequently determined that they were not involved with foreign intelligence at the time they were initially investigated and cleared."

From the charges so far, that seems to be the situation involving Mr. Walker, his relatives and associate.

On the issue of submarines, Admiral Thunman said that the ships armed with ballistic missiles "are virtually invulnerable."

He said that extensive studies of the submarines led to the conclusion that "there is no threat to that submarine force now or in the foreseeable future." While declining to discuss the Walker

case, he "there's been no antisubmarine warfare breakthrough."

Other naval officers said they were concerned with whatever the might have been given to the Soviet Union but said they were certain that none of it would put the Soviet Union in a position to jeopardize the operations of the submarines.